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**APPLICATION
FOR
UNITED STATES
LETTERS PATENT**

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METHOD OF USE
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FLAT MAIL SLEEVE PACKAGING AND METHOD OF USE

DESCRIPTION

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

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The present invention generally relates to a flat mail sleeve packaging system and method of use and, more particularly, to a flat mail packaging system used for packaging counter rotated bulk flats into a bundle.

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Background Description

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Publishers throughout the world print bulk flats (i.e., magazines, newspapers or other items typically less than 1¼ inch in thickness) which are delivered to the end consumer by a postal service or other delivery or transportation company. However, these products typically have bound edges and non-bound edges, where the bound edges are thicker than the non-bound edges. This difference in thickness may cause a “banana” effect or a tipping of the product when stacked at the publishing facilities.

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To ensure that the “banana” effect or tipping does not occur, the publisher will either tightly wrap the bundle or, more commonly, assemble the stacks of their product in a counter rotated bundle, i.e., with the bound edges rotated every so many pieces in order to maintain a straight stack. In the former stacking process, the product is bound so tightly with several

straps, shrink wrap and the like that the product is damaged during the bundling and transportation process. By using the counter rotation procedure, however, a mail sorting facility, whether it be a postal facility or other delivery or transportation facility, must reorient the stacks so that all of the bound edges are aligned. This allows for the sorting machines to properly sort and prepare for delivery of the product.

By way of example, in most modern postal facilities, major steps have been taken toward mechanization (e.g., automation) by the development of a number of machines and technologies. These machines and technologies include, amongst others, letter sorters, facer-cancelers, automatic address readers, parcel sorters, advanced tray conveyors, flat sorters, letter mail coding and stamp-tagging techniques and the like. As a result of these developments, postal facilities have become quite automated over the years, considerably reducing overhead costs.

In use, these machines and technologies such as flats sorting machines (FSM) are capable of processing more than 10,000 flats per hour by electronically identifying and separating prebarcoded mail, handwritten letters, and machine-imprinted pieces. Computer-driven single-line optical character readers (OCR) are used in this process.

However, many of the machines currently in use including, for example, the FSM require that the mail or flats be oriented in a certain manner in order for the machines to properly sort the mail for delivery. In order to accomplish this task for flats, human intervention is required to complete the product sorting process, i.e., rearrange stacks of flats received from the publisher to align the bound edges, to permit automated feeding of the product. This manual operation is both time consuming and costly, thus increasing overhead and hence delivery rates.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In a first aspect of the present invention, a flat mail sleeve packaging system is provided which is adapted to stack product in a constrained homogenous mass. In this aspect, a first constraining wall and a second constraining wall are provided. The second constraining wall is positioned with respect to the first constraining wall at a substantially perpendicular angle thereto. The first and second constraining walls are adapted for having the product placed therebetween with bound edges of the product all facing in a same direction without collapsing.

In embodiments of the first aspect, the system includes a first binding member extending between a length of one of the first and second constraining walls, and a second binding member, substantially perpendicular to the first binding member, used to provide additional stability to a stack of the product. The first and second constraining walls form a corner therebetween which is adapted to conform to a corner of the product, and a width of the first and second constraining walls is at least equal to or larger than a bound edge and the non bound edge of the product stacked thereon. The system may also include a third constraining wall which forms a "U" shape with the first and second constraining walls.

In a second aspect of the invention, a flat mail sleeve packaging system includes a first and second constraining wall, each having a length and a width. The second constraining wall is positioned with respect to the first constraining wall at a substantially perpendicular angle thereto to form a corner therebetween which is adapted to conform to a corner of the product. A binding member extends between the length of one of the first and second constraining walls. Each of the widths of the first and second constraining walls is at least equal to a bound edge and the non bound

edge of the product stacked thereon, and the first and second constraining walls are adapted for having the product placed therebetween with bound edges of the product all facing in a same direction without collapsing.

In a third aspect of the invention, a method of stacking product in a same direction in a flat packaging sleeve system having at least a first constraining wall and a second constraining wall having a corner formed therebetween is provided. In this method, the user stacks the product with all bound edges facing a same direction towards either surface of the at least first constraining wall or second constraining wall. The user continues to stack the product with all bound edges facing a same direction until a length of the stacked product substantially equals a length of the at least first constraining wall and second constraining wall. A binding member is then placed about the stacked product in a lengthwise direction of one at least first constraining wall or the second constraining wall. In this manner, the product is in a straight constrained homogenous mass stack within the at least first constraining wall and second constraining wall. A second binding member, perpendicular to the binding member, may also be provided about the stacked product to provide additional stability.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects, aspects and advantages will be better understood from the following detailed description of a preferred embodiment of the invention with reference to the drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram of the flat mail sleeve packaging system of the present invention;

Figure 2 shows the flat mail sleeve packaging system with flats or products stacked and bound thereon;

Figure 3 shows a schematic diagram of an alternative flat mail sleeve packaging system of the present invention;

Figures 4 and 5 show views of the flat mail sleeve packaging system of the present invention on a pallet for shipping; and

Figure 6 is a flow diagram showing the steps of implementing the method of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a flat mail sleeve packaging system and method of use. In this system, the flat mail sleeve packaging system allows a publisher or other user to stack bulk flats (also referred herein as product) in a non-counter rotated manner (i.e., a homogenous orientation) without having the stack of product collapse or become damaged during the stacking, binding or delivery process. This is accomplished by a system that includes a sleeve which is capable of holding the product in a straight constrained homogenous mass that can be easily handled and shipped without re-orientating the stack of product during the sorting process. In other words, the product can be unbound and set on an automatic feeder at a postal delivery facility without any further processing. In this manner, manual operations need not be performed on the stacks prior to mail sorting.

*Flat Mail Sleeve Packaging System
of the Present Invention*

Referring now to Figure 1, a schematic diagram of a first embodiment of the flat mail sleeve packaging system is shown. In this embodiment, the flat mail sleeve packaging system is depicted generally as reference numeral 100 and includes a first constraining wall 102 and a second constraining wall 104, both having constraining surfaces. In a preferred embodiment, the first constraining wall 102 includes a cut surface 106. In further embodiments, the first constraining wall 102 is at an angle with respect to the second constraining wall 104 thereby forming a corner 103 therebetween (conforming to a corner of the product placed thereon), and more specifically the first constraining wall 102 is at an angle of substantially 90° with respect to the second constraining wall 104 thereby forming an "L" shape. A first binding member 108 may also be used perpendicular to either the first constraining wall 102 or the second constraining wall 104. The first binding member 108 may be a strap, wrap, band, string or other similar binding member.

Still referring to Figure 1, the length "X" of the first and second constraining walls 102, 104 may vary depending on the particular use. For example, the length "X" of the first and second constraining walls 102, 104 may be 24 inches long to thus allow for easy pallet stacking. However, this length is merely exemplary of the present invention and should not be considered a limiting factor. Similarly, the width "Y" may also vary, but should preferably be at least equal to or greater than the dimensions of the product stacked thereon. It is desirable, in embodiments, to fold to fold any excess sleeve length to form endcaps 103 to protect end pieces of mail and to add rigidity to the system. The

endcaps may be perpendicular to a length of the first or second constraining walls 102 and 104.

Figure 2 shows the flat mail sleeve packaging system 100 with product 110 stacked and bound thereon. In this embodiment, the bound edges 110a of the product 110 are all oriented in a homogeneous arrangement facing the constraining wall 104; however, the bound edges 110a may equally be oriented facing the constraining wall 102. In either case, the binding member 108 is used to bind the product in a straight constrained homogenous mass. A second binding member 112, substantially perpendicular to the binding member 108, may also be used to provide additional stability to the stack of product. As further seen in Figure 2, the width "Y" of both constraining walls 102 and 104 is larger than the bound and non bound edges of the product 110 stacked thereon. The second binding member 112 may be a strap, wrap, band, string or other similar binding member.

Figure 3 shows an alternative embodiment of the flat mail sleeve packaging system 100 of the present invention. In this embodiment, a third constraining wall 114 facing the first constraining wall 102 is provided. The third constraining wall 114 is preferably substantially parallel to the first constraining wall 102 and perpendicular to the second constraining wall 104 thereby forming a "U" shape. In this configuration, the bound edges of the product may all be facing one of the first, second or third constraining wall 102, 104, 114 when being stacked on the flat mail sleeve packaging system 100 of the present invention. Also, in a preferred embodiment of this alternative embodiment, the first binding member 108 is attached across the length "X" of the central constraining wall 104.

In both the first and second embodiments of the present invention, the constraining walls may either be formed from a single piece of

material bent at approximately right angles or, alternatively, may be made form separate segments attached together to form the first second and third constraining walls. In either case, the adjacent constraining walls of the first or second embodiment form corners 103 therebetween which are designed to constrain the product within the flat mail packaging sleeve of the present invention. Also, it is contemplated that both of the embodiments may include endcaps.

Figures 4 and 5 show the flat mail sleeve packaging system 100 of either the first or second embodiment positioned on a pallet 114. Specifically, Figure 5 shows a top view of the pallet and Figure 6 shows a side view of the pallet. In this scenario, six flat mail sleeve packaging systems 100 may be provided at each stacking level of the pallet. Because the product are constrained in each of the flat mail sleeve packaging systems 100, there is no possibility of the stacks of product collapsing.

*Method of Using
the Present Invention*

Figure 6 is a flow diagram showing the steps of implementing the method of the present invention. Figure 6 may equally represent a high level block diagram of the system of the present invention, implementing the steps thereof.

In particular, in step 602, the publisher or user stacks the product with all of the bound edges facing a same direction towards any one of the surfaces of the present invention. In step 604, a determination is made as to whether the flat mail sleeve packaging system 100 of the present invention is completely filled with the product. If not, in step 602, the user continues to stack the product in a single homogenous orientation facing one surface of one of the constraining walls. Once the flat mail

sleeve packaging system 100 is filled, in step 606, a binding member is placed about the stacked product in a lengthwise direction "X" of one of the constraining walls. This now constrains the stack of the product to provide a straight constrained homogenous mass. In step 608, a second binding member such as a wrap or strap may optionally be placed on the stack perpendicular to the first binding member. In step 610, the constrained stack is then stacked on a pallet. Steps 602 through 610 may be repeated until the pallet is filled or no more stacks are needed.

While the invention has been described in terms of preferred embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention can be practiced with modification within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.